

## The wet nurse

by Syed Waliullah (1922-1971)

ABU Taleb Muhammad Salahuddin Saheb considered visiting relatives a routine domestic duty. However, he had not been able to freely perform that duty as long as he had been working. Now that he had retired, the hindrances had somewhat lessened.

One of the problems was that whenever Salahuddin Saheb planned to visit anyone he made elaborate preparations as if he were about to go on a safari. He never went to anybody's house on the spur of the moment. Generally, he sent a message prior to his proposed visit. He informed his prospective host the exact time of his arrival. He reminded him that he neither drank tea nor ate sweetsmeats and also that he neither chewed betel nor smoked cigarettes. Besides, as he followed a strict diet on his physician's advice, he could not accept dinners or luncheons. All that his host could offer him was a glass of plain water. However, since he was mortally afraid of germs, and, not knowing whether the glass of water had been properly boiled, that too remained untouched.

The circle of Salahuddin Saheb's relatives was rather large, but, because of his advanced age and well-to-do economic condition, he considered himself to be everybody's guardian and consequently visited them all once or twice a year. Still, as his relatives were quite numerous, he had to draw the line somewhere. He did not regularly visit those relatives who were beyond his specific circle.

It was therefore a great surprise when one afternoon Salahuddin Saheb appeared at the house of Quader, a distant relative, without any prior notice. It was clear that he had gone there to attend the death of Quader's sixth child wife had

passed away three days ago, shortly after birth. Salahuddin Saheb was also in mourning. Three days back, he had lost his own beloved daughter, Khaleida, during childbirth.

Salahuddin Saheb sat down on the only available chair in Quader's small room, resting his clasped hands on the handle of his walking stick. Quader's wife sat down on the wooden bed covered by a mat. Quader's wife glanced at Salahuddin Saheb with some perplexity. The room filled with silence.

At last Salahuddin Saheb cleared his throat rather noisily and looked at Quader. He then looked around the shabby room. Quader was a low-paid clerk, and there were marks of poverty everywhere. Apart from the rickety chair and the wooden bed, there was no other furniture in the room. A two-year-old calendar, depicting a crimson sunset on a river, hung on one wall in a feeble attempt to brighten the place. The slanting rays of the afternoon sun touched the calendar, showing up its thick layer of dust. On the floor, in front of the door leading to the inner room, sat a little girl, of about four years, eating puffed rice from a bowl. More puffed rice had fallen to the ground than had gone into her mouth. She was wearing a shabby frock, and her face was streaked with dirt.

Salahuddin Saheb was not pleased with what he saw. He was uncertain about making the proposal that had prompted his visit. But he realised that he had no alternative.

Clearing his throat for the second time, he looked straight at Quader. "There's nobody to breastfeed my grandson."

Salahuddin Saheb did not elaborate further. Quader, of course, immediately understood his meaning. But he waited for Salahuddin Saheb to complete what he had come to say.

Salahuddin Saheb, however, took a little more time to explain why he had come. He had never seen Quader's wife. But he had heard that she was quite healthy. Though the mother of five children, she had never been ill. Moreover, she had breastfed all her five children herself. Her children were also healthy, even the unkempt little girl seated on the floor. Apart from everything, he had also heard that Quader's wife was a kindhearted, generous woman. Still, Salahuddin Saheb hesitated to speak more openly out of respect for Quader's recent bereavement. His hesitation, however, soon evaporated.

"I've heard that your wife is healthy by the grace of Allah. Would she agree to breastfeed my motherless grandson? If she does, I'd like to bring the baby immediately." Salahuddin Saheb waited for a moment and then said, "Will you go and ask her?"

Quader went into the inner room. Salahuddin Saheb continued to sit where

he was, his hands atop the carved handle of his walking stick. He looked around once more, his glance falling on the unkempt little girl seated on the floor. Had he been wrong to make the proposal? He heaved a deep sigh. But he realised that it was meaningless to ponder over it now that he had already spoken what was on his mind.

When Quader returned, Salahuddin Saheb looked up at him with some apprehension, but then relaxed at the sight of Quader's face. He tapped the ground with his walking stick and then got up to depart. He stood unusually straight for a man of his age.

Standing at the door which opened onto a semi-metalled road, Salahuddin Saheb seemed lost in thought. He then began to explain what he should have said earlier. "The doctor has, of course, advised us to give the child a bottle. But I don't believe in these modern ways. An infant should be breastfed. That's the natural way."

He sighed deeply, but controlled himself immediately. Even in the midst of profound grief, Salahuddin Saheb could contain himself because in his long life he had experienced many sorrows. He had learned one important lesson: when a man is overwhelmed with sorrow he has to think of his duties first. It does not do to give in to grief.

Salahuddin Saheb frowned, thinking about his son-in-law who had collapsed like a frail twig at the news of his wife's death. But the young man had nothing else to do. Salahuddin Saheb had to think about everything that had to be done.

While boarding the car, Salahuddin Saheb said, "An ayah will accompany the child."

Shortly after dusk that evening,

Salahuddin Saheb brought his grandchild to the Quaders. The ayah carried the child into the inner room, while he sat in the drawing room straining his ears, wondering whether Quader's wife had changed her mind during this time. One could not rely on a grief-stricken woman. A little later, however, when the ayah appeared in the doorway, displaying her betel-stained teeth, he realised that Quader's wife had not rejected the child. Of course, there was no reason to think that she would have. How could anybody deny an infant? Not even a woman overwhelmed with grief at the recent loss of a child could be so heartless.

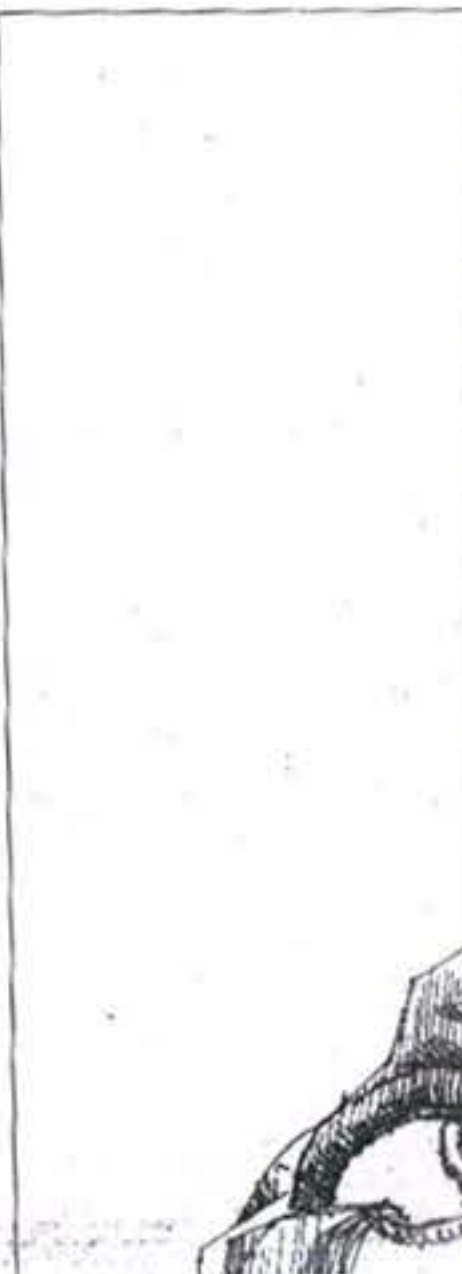
Just before boarding the car, Salahuddin Saheb paused briefly and said, "If your wife requires any medicine or medical attention, I'll send a doctor." His voice choked with emotion. Even in the midst of sorrow, he felt a sense of satisfaction that things had worked out so well. It was God's immense mercy, he thought. He sat majestically in the car and looked straight ahead.

Quader's wife, Majeda, really possessed sound health. She was short-statured and well-built. Though she was the mother of five children, her body was still firm.

When the ayah entered the room with the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, Majeda looked at the baby indifferently. A tiny face was visible from the bundle of clothes. Its eyes were closed. The child still seemed to be asleep in its mother's dark womb. Majeda's eyes started to sparkle with joy. She stretched out her hands eagerly. "Give the baby to me."

Since early that morning Majeda's breasts had been heavy and swollen. She knew that milk was being stored in her breasts to nurture a new life. This realisation caused her three-day-old grief to intensify once more. For whom were her breasts swelling with milk? The child that she had borne in her womb was dead. Was nature blind? Sometimes she thought nature was blind or, if it could see, it was jeering at her grief. Majeda thought that she could no longer bear the burden of her milk-laden breasts. Perhaps Salahuddin Saheb's proposal was a solution of sorts. God works in mysterious ways.

Majeda held the child close to her bosom and stared at it. She trembled all over in a surge of emotion. The child whimpered feebly. Majeda was surprised. She had not expected the swaddling to cry. Her own child had emerged silently from an endless darkness and returned to it without making a sound. Did Majeda think that she was holding her lifeless child in her arms? The ayah, seated on the floor at a little distance, drew out betel leaf and tobacco from the back in her sari



waist. After folding the betel leaf and popping it into her mouth, she said, "The child's hungry. Give him the breast."

Majeda's eyes sparkled, and a happy smile flickered on her lips. Of course she would give the baby her breast. Her breasts were heavy with stored milk, aching with the throbbing of life. What she had stored in her breasts was all her love, all her maternal feelings. She remembered how, when her other children would start to cry, drops of milk would ooze from her breasts and her stomach muscles would tighten strangely. At the whimpering of the child in her arms, Majeda felt her breasts start to throb. It did not matter that the child was not her own.

The ayah reminded her again, "The child's exhausted with crying. Why aren't you giving your breast to the little mite?"

Majeda quickly unbuttoned her sari blouse and freed one of her breasts. As soon as the baby felt the nipple, he began to pull on it hungrily.

A moment later the child started whimpering again, the sound announcing that his hunger had not been assuaged. The ayah looked at Majeda enquiringly. The scene that met her eyes caused her to look even more perplexed. There was a blank look on Majeda's face. She seemed oblivious of the child's whimpers.

"What's wrong?" the ayah enquired.

Majeda did not reply. Her dry lips trembled a little. She spoke in a low voice, "The milk has solidified."

The child had not got a drop of milk. Majeda's breasts were like stone.



The following morning, after fajr prayers, Salahuddin Saheb came to see how his grandchild was faring. He entered the drawing room and sat down as he had the previous day, resting his hands on the handle of his walking stick. When Quader entered, he looked at him but asked no questions. He found no reason to do so. He only perked up his ears, trying to hear the cry of his grandson. Since he heard no baby crying, he took it for granted that his grandchild had been fed. Quader was unaware that his wife had been unable to nurse the baby. So he also remained silent.

Salahuddin Saheb did not want to stay much longer. He tapped his walking stick on the ground, and, without looking at Quader, said, "After fajr prayers, as I was starting my wazifa, I thought of something. I own a plot of land at Munshi Hat. It's a paddy field. I would like to give your wife a portion of that land. I hope she won't mind."

Salahuddin Saheb stood up without waiting for Quader's reply. The waiting car sprang to life, filling the room with the smell of gasoline. As he was about to board the car, he said, pointing his walking stick upwards, "I will send you fish, meat and vegetables. The ayah can cook well."

That afternoon the ayah tried to soothe the fretting baby. She was worried. In spite of all her efforts, Majeda had failed to breastfeed the baby. The baby was four days old, but it had not received a single drop of milk since its birth. The ayah had given it some water, but water is not

enough for a baby. She knew that a newborn baby could survive for a few days without any nourishment. But when it had had no milk for four days—that was serious.

Majeda sat motionless inside the room. Her lips were dry, her eyes were closed. Baffled by her continued inability to nurse the baby, she sat there numbly, her blouse still unbuttoned. Her uncovered breasts seemed heavy as stone. She had no doubt in her mind that the milk in her breasts had thickened too much to flow freely. But why? Was it possible that the milk had been meant for her own child, and now that her own child was dead the milk in her breasts had dried up?

The moment she thought this, a sense of victory began to course through her arteries. But it lasted for a few moments only. She realised that the thought was cruel and she immediately felt ashamed. How could she have had such a cruel thought? The child under her care might not be hers but it was still a child. A motherless child. How could anyone think of depriving it of milk? Not even a heartless being could do so. Besides, with all her heart and soul, she wanted to breastfeed the baby. Could this desire be in vain?

But Majeda's heartless breasts remained heavy and hard. She heard the child crying outside.

Why had her milk thickened and dried up in this manner?

A crueler idea came to her mind. She thought that the strong desire she had to breastfeed the baby was a way of suppressing the truth. The reality was that

she did not want the baby to survive because her own baby was dead. That was why her milk-laden breasts had turned hard.

The thought pained her. For a moment she felt suffocated. Then a storm of sobs racked her body.

Quader had just returned from office when the noise of Salahuddin Saheb's car sounded from outside the house. On hearing it, Majeda felt a mixture of exhaustion and fear. This time she thought of Salahuddin Saheb, not the baby. Salahuddin Saheb did not yet know that she had been unable to give a drop of milk to his grandchild. The attending ayah also had not yet disclosed the matter. But how long would she keep quiet? By now Quader had come to know of his wife's failure, but he too had not disclosed it to anybody. But he too could not suppress the fact much longer. What would Salahuddin Saheb think when he learned the truth? Moreover, if he took his grandchild back home, wouldn't Majeda die of shame? Majeda got up to call her husband. In her anxiety, her face had turned frightfully pale. When Quader came in, Majeda said, "Don't say anything yet to him, please. The child will get milk tonight, I know. The pain in my breasts has increased terribly. It won't be long now."

Quader kept his wife's request. But he did say to Salahuddin Saheb, "Majeda should see a doctor."

Salahuddin Saheb was perturbed. "What is the matter?"

"She doesn't seem to be very well," replied Quader.

That same evening a doctor checked Majeda and informed them that Majeda had no milk in her breasts. It

was not unusual. If a mother got a deep shock, she might not produce milk. The doctor also tried to explain in medical jargon why Majeda's breasts had become engorged without milk. The doctor's observations made Majeda still more worried. The fact that milk had not been produced within her breasts upset her even more than the thought that her milk had solidified.

There were reasons to be concerned. Majeda now realised that she could no more avoid the cruel thoughts that plagued her. A nagging voice cried out inside her, "Your own child is dead. Why should your breasts produce milk?"

These words pained her again as before. Majeda knew that she had to do something drastic. She knew she didn't have much time. Salahuddin Saheb wouldn't delay after the doctor's diagnosis. He would take his grandchild back home immediately. He had come to Majeda only with the hope that she would be able to breastfeed the motherless child.

Majeda felt that the entire episode was a rest for her. Her child's death, Salahuddin Saheb's proposal, the doctor's diagnosis—everything was a test for her. The doctor was mistaken.

Majeda knew there was milk in her breasts. Her breasts were even more swollen that evening. They were surely full of milk. They felt softer now, spongy almost because of the fluid content. She suspected that something was restricting the flow of milk through the nipples, like a cork plugging the mouth of a bottle.

Majeda got up quietly, her face flushed with faint hope. She knew she would pass the test. Once she succeeded, her motherhood would be established and her dead child would come back to her again.

Majeda wasted no time. Quickly she unbuttoned her blouse and freed her breasts. She groped under the pillow until she found a long hairpin. She held the hairpin firmly in her hand and then, with a sudden, fierce movement, plunged it into one nipple. A shooting pain engulfed her. Everything grew faint and dark before her eyes, but she did not cry out. Then, feeling carefully for the exact spot in the other nipple, she plunged the hairpin into her other breast. Once again an unbearable pain sufficed her. She was about to faint, but willed herself to resist the weakness. Through her searing agony, she could feel the liquid gushing forth. The stoppers in her breasts had been removed. Now her milk could flow freely.

Salahuddin Saheb's car stopped noisily outside Quader's house. Majeda was quite at ease now. Her milk was flowing; she had no reason to be afraid. The milk continued to pour down her breasts. But the milk was not white. It was red as blood.